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SUBJECT: PANAMA PUBLIC OPINION POLLS NOT DEPENDABLE

INDICATORS OF ELECTION RESULTS

SUMMARY: POLLS DON'T PICK PRESIDENTS

[11.](#) (SBU) Panama's nationally-published public opinion polls are probably biased, do not offer a dependable measure of Panamanians' voting preferences, and probably will not accurately predict outcomes for the May 2 elections. While we still think Martin Torrijos will win the May 2, 2004 presidential vote, in 1994 and 1999, public opinion polls published in Panama dailies failed to correctly rank presidential candidates, or even predict the winner. For instance, in this year's race Partido Arnulfista (PA) candidate Jose Miguel Aleman only escaped single-digit opinion poll rankings in January 2004, but his alliance has 401,225 registered voters (among an electorate of almost 2 million potential voters). Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) candidate Martin Torrijos, whose party has 434,000 registered voters, remains the front-runner by any measure, but former President Guillermo Endara's "lead" over Aleman is dubious. End Summary.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHED POLLS

[12.](#) (SBU) There are two main reasons that polls in Panama inaccurately predict electoral results. First, while 75% of Panama's registered voters will vote, guessing who will and who won't vote is nearly impossible for pollsters. Second, party affiliation in Panama is crucial for many voters, but polls often can't capture the vote-winning potential of candidates who are backed by coalitions with large numbers of loyal members.

[13.](#) (U) The CID Gallup poll (published in El Panama America) and the Dichter & Neira poll (published in La Prensa) have the longest track records, but they mis-forecast electoral results in 1999. Critics question their objectivity because they both perform for-fee services for specific political parties. La Prensa founder Roberto Eisenmann had trumpeted the independence of Dichter & Neira, but PolOfs recently learned of candidates for whom Dichter & Neira provides private polling services. Critics also assert that newspaper editors and publishers are biased, further threatening the credibility of poll results. The Board of Directors of both La Prensa and El Panama America are packed with Torrijos supporters.

[14.](#) (U) Polls failed to accurately predict voting results in Panama's two most recent national elections. In 1999, public opinion polls showed Martin Torrijos (who finished second with 37.8% of the vote) leading Mireya Moscoso (who won with 44.8%) until just two weeks before the elections. Polls in 1994 correctly pegged the winner, Ernesto Perez Balladares (EPB), but overestimated support for eventual third-place and fourth-place finishers Ruben Blades and Ruben Dario Carles to the detriment of Mireya Moscoso, who finished a close second.

[15.](#) (SBU) The credibility of three other public opinion polls with shorter track records is also in doubt. Recently formed PSM Siglo Dos, which publishes results in top selling tabloid La Critica, also does private polling for Torrijos' Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) and its candidates. The intellectual author of El Siglo's monthly "2004 Political Monitor" is former PRD activist Jaime Porcell and El Siglo President Ebrahim Asvat openly advocates for Martin Torrijos.

[16.](#) (SBU) Unlike most other polls, the "Decision 2004" poll, published consistently in La Estrella de Panam, shows Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara well behind Arnulfista Jose Miguel Aleman. La Estrella's bias toward the Moscoso administration is so well known that even Aleman's campaign manager recently told PolOff that Aleman decided not to place

an anti-Torrijos advertisement there since, "people would laugh at us if we published it in La Estrella."

NOT EVERYONE VOTES

16. (SBU) May 2, 2004 voting results probably will differ markedly from pre-election polls because the pollsters have not yet learned to identify likely voters. (Perhaps 25-30% of registered voters will not vote.) In addition, some Arnulfistas allege that lingering memories of Panama's 21-year military dictatorship make some respondents reluctant to reveal their true voting preference to pollsters. Fourth-place candidate Ricardo Martinelli hired a firm to perform a "likely voter" poll, which clearly predicted a Torrijos win. It prompted Martinelli's campaign manager to tell PolOff, "unless the U.S. Government declares Torrijos a national enemy, and maybe not even then, he'll be Panama's next President."

CORE MEMBERSHIP DRIVES PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

17. (SBU) Historically, core supporters of the PRD and the PA tend to vote for whoever is running on their party's slate. The following figures recount how the seven parties fared in presidential voting during Panama's 1994 and 1999 general elections:

PARTY	1994	1999
Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD)	30.0%	31.0%
Arnulfista Party (PA)	19.8%	28.7%
Liberal Republican Movement (MOLIRENA)	10.8%	10.9%
Popular Party (PP)	2.4%	10.6%
Solidarity Party (PS)	1.7%	4.9%
National Liberal Party (PLN)	***	2.8%
Democratic Change Party (CD)	***	2.8%

*** Neither the PLN nor CD existed in 1994.

On May 2, 2004, the PP probably will be lucky to survive as a party with 4% of the vote (as required under Panama's electoral law), while Solidarity will do much better, with former president Guillermo Endara as its standard bearer.

18. (SBU) The PRD, with its sophisticated electoral machine, has assigned teams in each administrative division to make sure local party members have transportation to the polls (and a free meal in many cases). The Arnulfistas are preparing for the elections much like the PRD. During provincial trips, PolOffs observed that the Solidarity Party lacks the funds or manpower to develop the same sort of infrastructure at the local level, although Endara campaign officials stoutly maintain that they will get out the vote.

MIGRANTS AND TURNCOATS

19. (SBU) Analogous more to snapshots than videos, polls cannot capture subtle changes in voter mood, due to candidates and voters migrating between parties or legislators who campaign hard for themselves but quietly endorse another party's candidate for President. Migrations occur at the highest levels, like Torrijos' first VP candidate Samuel Lewis Navarro, who left the Solidarity Party in late 2003 to join his friend Martin. Mobile components of the electorate are typically non-core voters, many of whom register in a party only to support a pre-candidate who may eventually lose an internal race. Those voters lose interest if their favorite candidate is no longer running and may not even vote. For over a year, the PRD has been aware that Legislator Olivia de Pomares a supporter of former President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-99), hasn't lifted a finger to promote the candidacy of Martin Torrijos. Arnulfista sources recently told PolOffs that Pomares and others are urging their supporters to vote for Aleman for President (a strategy aimed at setting the stage for another run for president by Perez Balladares in 2009).

COMMENT: PREDICTION WRAP-UP

10. (SBU) PolOffs have heard plausible arguments explaining why Torrijos, Endara, or Aleman (but not Martinelli) will win on May 2. The polls meanwhile mostly show Torrijos well ahead, mostly agree that Endara is second, and Martinelli last. A very dubious "Decision 2004" poll that La Estrella published on March 31 showed Aleman ahead of Endara by nearly 24% and only a 2.1% gap between Torrijos (39.2%) and Aleman (37.1%). Embassy believes Torrijos will win the presidency, but the Endara vs. Aleman battle for second-place is too close to call.

